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RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA

UNCLAS BOGOTA 000686

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO MEDICAL MISSION HIGHLIGHTS SECURITY
GAINS IN LA MACARENA

REF: 10 BOGOTA 264

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The Ambassador traveled to La Macarena, Meta, on February 2 to tour a SOUTHCOM-sponsored humanitarian assistance mission supplying medical services to more than 5,000 Colombian citizens. The operation in the former guerrilla heartland underlined the security gains made under Colombia's National Consolidation Plan. Despite substantial security successes and other gains, the consolidation effort faces continuing challenges. END SUMMARY.

HUMANITARIAN MISSION PROVIDES FREE SERVICES TO LOCAL POPULATION

12. (SBU) The Ambassador toured the annual bilateral U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) sponsored Medical Readiness and Training Exercise (MEDRETE) site at a local school in La Macarena, Meta Department. The event, "Compromiso Colombia 2010," (Commitment Colombia 2010) was a nine-day exercise in San Vicente del Caguan, Caqueta, and La Macarena conducted by medical personnel from the U.S. Army, with support from the Colombian Army and local civilian personnel. The MEDRETE addressed health needs of the local population and demonstrated U.S. commitment to the Government of Colombia's (GOC) consolidation strategy. Medical services were provided under the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative, the Embassy's strategy to accompany the GOC's consolidation efforts.

13. (SBU) Accompanied by Colombian Military (COLMIL) Commander General Freddy Padilla, the Ambassador toured the working mission, observed the variety of treatments available, and talked to patients. A total of 5,120 people were seen at the two sites combined during the nine days of operations, including 3,733 for general medical treatment up to the surgery level, 236 for dental procedures, and 1,141 for optometry services. The Ambassador met some of the 35 U.S. medical providers giving treatment, part of the 70 U.S. military personnel participating in the mission. Free medications and 3,000 radios were provided to the local communities as part of the operation.

14. (SBU) The Ambassador spoke to members of the mission and the Colombian press of the tangible benefits increased security has brought to the region. The Ambassador acknowledged that a MEDRETE in this area, the former FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) heartland, would have been impossible five years ago due to the presence of armed groups and the lack of either economic infrastructure or a viable state presence in the area. The local population can now receive vital public health services, he said, largely due to the efforts of COLMIL and local authorities. The Ambassador underscored that if this stability can be achieved in an area as remote as La Macarena, then it can be replicated in any part of Colombia.

PROGRESS IN CONSOLIDATION PLAN MODEL, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

15. (SBU) The Ambassador was briefed on the advances and challenges facing the consolidation program by the civilian coordinator for the GOC's Plan for the Integrated Consolidation of the Macarena (PCIM). The PCIM is the GOC's model program to increase state presence in priority areas under the National Consolidation Plan, in this case focusing on a former stronghold of the FARC in the Macarena region of Meta (see Reftel). The Ambassador saw how

territory previously under the control of guerrillas and used for the cultivation of illicit crops has been recuperated by COLMIL and police in many local municipalities. He was also briefed on the challenges of 2010, including the consolidation of security and citizen protection, eradication of illicit crops, inefficient land titling, consolidation of economic development opportunities, and human rights abuses. The Ambassador concluded by underlining the hope that the successes of the PCIM model can be applied to the rest of the country. He urged progress in the land titling issue, increased tertiary road transport routes, and credit access to local farmers. He also stressed the need for civil institutions to play a significant role in maintaining the National Consolidation Plan.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PRESS COVERAGE

16. (U) The Ambassador's visit to La Macarena was covered by national and regional media, with most of the focus on remarks from the Ambassador on recently released figures of U.S. foreign assistance support to Colombia, but other media concentrating on the results of the services provided to the local population. Coverage included articles in Bogota's daily El Espectador (centrist, circulation: 264,000), Medellin leading daily El Colombiano (conservative, circulation: 290,700), Cali's leading daily El Pais (conservative, circulation: 210,600), Monteria's regional daily El Meridiano de Cordoba (circulation: 136,000), and national Todelar Radio (listenership: 150,000).

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